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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (MISSING SUBJECT TAGS)

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA AND NEA/IPA

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SUBJECT: JORDAN'S ISRAEL WATCHERS LIKE LIVNI, SEE HER LOSING

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Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The political tumult in Israel has grabbed the attention of Jordan's Israel-watching cadre. Most of our contacts - largely supportive of, if pessimistic about, the peace process - were pleased Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni had won leadership of the Kadima Party (particularly given that the alternative was the more hardline Shaul Mofaz) and viewed her call for elections as reflecting strong principles, not weakness. Few, however, thought she would guide her party to victory in February; many feared the right's ascendance, with Binyamin Netanyahu and Likud at the helm. End Summary.

Livni Worthy...

¶2. (C) Virtually all of our contacts - including Foreign Minister Salah Al-Bashir - were pulling for a Livni victory in the Israeli parliamentary elections slated for February 2009. In his November 1 meeting with IO A/S Brian Hook, Bashir voiced this hope, though he noted that caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was actually his first choice. He wistfully suggested that the outgoing PM's recent press interview about the peace process - in which he repudiated his right-leaning thinking on the Palestinian Question of the past 35 years - should have happened six months ago.

¶3. (C) Our contacts almost uniformly saw Livni's failure to form a government (which would have obviated snap elections) as a sign of her commitment to the peace process. Many highlighted her rejection of the demands by the ultra-orthodox Shas Party that she exclude Jerusalem from talks, rather than focusing on her rejection of Shas's exorbitant fiscal demands. For instance, Ghazi Al-Sa'adi, whose Dar Al-Jalil publishing house also teaches Hebrew courses, judged that Livni had proved herself a strong political personality by not succumbing to Shas "extortion." "This improved her standing and gave her an agenda," he concluded. Ultimately, what matters is not so much who is the next Prime Minister of Israel, but which camp - the right or the left - has the most seats and provides the backbone of the next government, according to Sa'adi. "I'm a pessimist. I don't expect any essential change," he concluded, pointing out that polls show the center and left parties garnering less than a majority. Note: Sa'adi plans to gather friends the night of the Israeli elections to watch the returns on Israeli TV; apparently a long-standing tradition. End Note.

¶4. (C) Similarly, Director of Ammanet independent radio and a frequent contributor to the Jerusalem Post, Daoud Kuttub, told us he believed Livni wanted to continue talking peace. Were she not, he reasoned, she would have been more willing to make concessions to potential coalition partners. He

expected her to reap some political benefit for having stood on principle. Oraib Rantawi, Director of the Al-Quds Center for Political Studies observed that Israeli commentators were divided on whether Livni had failed and was forced into elections, or whether she had demonstrated leadership; Rantawi leaned toward the latter judgment. Issa Al-Shuaibi, director of Palestinian chief negotiator Ahmad Qurei's Amman office, told PolOff on October 28 that Abu Ala remains a strong supporter of Livni and was pleased by her victory over Mofaz in the Kadima primaries, having developed a good working relationship as she headed up the negotiations file under Ehud Olmert. MP Mubarak Al-Yamin Abbadi, who chairs parliament's legal committee, described Israel as a "real democracy," unlike Jordan. He saw a Livni win as the best chance for forward movement in the peace process, and praised her as having "real political charisma" that could propel her to victory.

15. (C) Not everyone was sanguine about Livni's plans, however. For instance, Mahmoud Mheidat, newly appointed head of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, told PolOffs on October 27 that she was neither qualified nor experienced enough to be Prime Minister, and that her background as an intelligence officer was problematic. He questioned her ability and interest in negotiating peace.

... But Can She Win?

16. (C) Despite a certain enthusiasm for Livni - and her hoped-for continued willingness to seriously pursue the peace process - several of our contacts raised doubts that she would come out on top, come February. FM Bashir, for instance, questioned Livni's ability to challenge the status quo, saying, "she's a lawyer, and that means that she's cautious - a bit timid." MP Abbadi said a Netanyahu victory would be a "step backward" to a "voice from the past." MP

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Mheidat saw a Netanyahu victory in the offing, which would be further indication that "radical attitudes" will have gained further ground. Rantawi, who saw Israel's elections as even more important to Jordan than the U.S. elections, expected Netanyahu and the right would win in February, which he thought would make life difficult for Jordan.

Some See U.S. Elections, Continued Involvement, as Key

17. (C) Sa'adi said the Israeli political map is too complicated to allow real progress on peace without strong pressure from the United States. Sounding a similar tone, Abu Ala confidant Shuaibi argued that the Israeli left and right had failed in both war and peace, and Israel lacks strong leadership. Right now, his greatest fear is that the U.S. will become distracted by the financial crisis, and will not be able to devote attention to the Middle East.

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